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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 KABUL 000439

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTY DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN: KEY TO
LONG-TERM STABILITY

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Classified By: Ambassador Eikenberry reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: Functioning political parties may be critical to Afghanistan's long-term democratic development and stability but they are generally unpopular and misunderstood, prompting most Afghan politicians to avoid affiliation. The USG provides some technical assistance to political parties but what they need most is more political space, an electoral system that encourages party development, and civic education. We will increase our engagement with political parties, focus on younger activists, and ensure assistance programs consistent with long-term development goals instead of being elections-driven. The intent is that in the long-term future, political parties in Afghanistan will influence and develop Afghan's democracy. End Summary.

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Political Parties: Context and Challenges
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¶2. (C) Over 106 political parties are currently registered in Afghanistan, yet the overwhelming majority of politicians running for election choose to not list themselves on the ballot with a political party. In the August 2009 elections, 12 percent of provincial council candidates registered with a party, 20 percent of the presidential candidates officially affiliated with a party, and only 79 of 249 sitting MPs are affiliated. Most MPs refuse to disclose party affiliation. Their reasons are numerous.

¶3. (C) The following list of issues relating to political party development in Afghanistan reflects the insights of MPs, political party leaders, university professors, think tanks, and Afghan government officials.

--NEGATIVE STIGMA ON THE WANE ... SOMEDAY?

After three decades of war, Afghans are suspicious of political organizations, since historically parties were synonymous with the armed groups that support them. The five major armed groups operating in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 are now some of the strongest parties: Jamiat-i Milli Islami originally led by Ahmed Shah Massoud (now Professor Rabbani); Junbesh-e Milli Islami led by Abdul Rashid Dostum; Hezb-e Hawdat-i Islami led by Karim Khalili (there are four or five branches, one of which is led by Mohaqqueq), Harakat-i Islami led by Mohammed Asif Mohseni; and Dawat-i Islami led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf. Two thirds of the strongest political parties, according to a 2009 National Democratic Institute (NDI) study, are currently led by former warlords who commanded large groups of armed men. The two Presidential candidates who obtained the second and third most votes in 2009, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and MP Ramazan Bashardost, told us that they would not consider forming a political party due to the negative stigma the term carries,

and therefore would instead form "coalitions" or "groups."

However, there are signs that political parties are slowly losing part of this stigma, as party candidates fared better in recent elections than independent candidates, and some former militia-based parties are making the first steps towards the democratization of their leadership structures. In the 2009 Provincial Council (PC) elections, candidates affiliated with a party were 50 percent more likely to win. Also, in the case of the formerly militia-based Junbesh, the leadership of the party is now governed democratically -- by a board of twelve deputy chairmen who vote on all party decisions. In other former militia-associated parties, the foreign-educated sons and daughters of prominent warlords are starting to take on roles within the organizations, and their visions for their parties future involve greater democratization.

--PATRONAGE SYSTEM ENCOURAGES NON-AFFILIATION

Afghan politics are dominated by the patronage system; if individuals support a party, they expect jobs and funds in return. Therefore, if a politician chooses to openly belong to one faction, they limit their options and funding streams, unable to switch sides as freely to obtain the best payoffs. Political groups generally do not focus on issues, but rather, shift allegiances in harmony with the political winds and to always "go with the winner." Several MPs told us they choose to never reveal their party affiliations due to this reason, and admit they actually belong to several parties, some of which have adversarial relationships.

--CULTURAL PREFERENCE TOWARDS TRADITIONAL LEADERS RATHER THAN PLATFORM

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Many Afghan politicians raise cultural issues as one of the key obstacles to party development, although some consider this issue a result of varying education levels. They claim political parties are not based on ideas or platforms, but rather the personal patronage to one strongman. Even former warlord Sayyaf's political advisor told us that, "when Sayyaf dies, his party will die with him." Most parties are similar, and are referred to in the press and among politicians as "Qanooni's party" or "Mohaqqueq's party" instead of "Hezb-e-Afghanistan-i-Naween" or "Hezb-e-Wahdat-i-islam-i-mardum-i-Afghanistan ." Most interlocutors tell us they often do not know the names of the parties, but rather just the one strong man behind them. These traditional leaders are often the individual who protected a specific ethnic group during the war, and are therefore respected by members of that ethnicity. Also, since warlords are allowed in the Parliament, moving away their dominance remains difficult; improved candidate vetting would ameliorate this issue.

--THIRD-COUNTRY INTERFERENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

India, Iran and Pakistan in particular, and Turkey and Russia to a lesser extent, provide direct funding to political parties, according to most Afghan politics watchers. Reportedly, the conservative Pashtun parties are funded by Pakistan and the Gulf States, while other conservative Sunni parties, of other ethnicities, are also funded by the Gulf States. Iran prefers to fund Shia parties, while Russia and Turkey support the ethnically similar Turkmen and Uzbeks in the Junbesh party. At least seven political parties own television stations, radios stations, and newspapers. The son of Second Vice President Khalili told us that their Wahdat party has a new television station, but that it is impossible to obtain enough advertising to support the station. He claimed that the other branches of their Wahdat party are all on the Iranian payroll since it's the only way to support such expensive media outlets. Political party leader and owner of Emrooz TV MP Haji Kabuli also claimed to

us that all television stations in Afghanistan lose money so their function has to be compensated by other means.

--POLITICAL SPACE LARGELY DICTATED BY THE PRESIDENCY

Since President Karzai took office, he has refused to form his own political party, instead favoring a patronage, personality-based, and tribal politics framework. This influences the entire political sphere, as there is little incentive to form an opposition when there is no coherent pro-government group based on any common principles or ideology. Instead, individual-based politics reign.

In addition, the Executive has frequently ignored Parliamentary decisions, which limits Parliament's authority, and further discourages the development of any unified opposition groups or political parties. Most Afghan politicians will settle for supporting the Executive in exchange for financial favors and other opportunities. Two of the most visible and morale-stifling examples of the Executive dominating over the Parliament was the decision to ignore, on at least three occasions during Karzai's past term, the Parliament's vote of no confidence or refusal to approve a Cabinet appointment.

--SINGLE, NON-TRANSFERABLE VOTE(SNTV) DISCOURAGES PARTY DEVELOPMENT

The SNTV system allows every Afghan to vote once for an individual candidate, and in the case of the Parliamentary elections, one MP per province. Most votes are "wasted" on the most popular candidates, which allows unpopular candidates to win elections with few votes. In Kabul province, for example, Lower House Speaker Yunus Qanooni, MP and former presidential candidate Bashardost, and Hazara warlord Mohaqeq took about 113,000 votes to win seats, while fundamentalist former warlord Sayyaf won with only 9,800 votes. At least five MPs won with about 2,000 votes, leaving them with virtually no mandate. This also encourages electoral fraud, since it takes little effort to stuff enough votes to win. If the electoral system changed to a mixed system, every voter would vote once for an individual, and once for a party. This way, half of the candidates would be elected directly, while half would be elected through parties. This reform would provide a convincing incentive for party formation, and improve the composition of the Parliament.

--PARTY REGISTRATION AND POLITICAL BIAS

Some political party leadership has voiced concern that the

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Afghan government, in the form of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), is responsible for registering political parties in Afghanistan. The Kabul-based think tank Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) noted in a 2009 study that some political parties were not allowed to register under one MOJ but could do so after the Minister changed to one who was more sympathetic to their party. AREU recommends that an independent commission be established, with UN participation, in order to better monitor the political party registration process in Afghanistan.

--POLITICAL PARTY GLUT

The MOJ has at least 106 parties registered to date, but only about 15 have obtained any representation in the Parliament. A new law published in November 7 2009 seeks to limit the proliferation of political parties by increasing the minimum number of individuals that need to register as party members from 700 to 10,000 before you can register the organization. Political parties were given until May 7 2010 to re-register. Although this law will help limit the number of parties -- a positive step -- it will likely eliminate several smaller democratic parties. Although this is unfortunate, hopefully

it will provide a reason for them to consolidate into a more powerful party.

--VIOLENCE/THREATS DISCOURAGE POLITICAL VIEWS

Some Afghan politicians note that due to the precarious security environment in many provinces, it is too dangerous to openly express political views. This is particularly common in the South and the East, and pockets of the North where violence is now increasing.

--EXTERNAL FINANCIAL SUPPORT ADVANTAGES LARGER PARTIES

Many of the smaller, democratic parties complain that their members are unable to pay party dues, and that the larger, primarily former mujahedeen parties receive illegal outside support from Iran and Pakistan.

----- USG Programs -----

¶4. (U) Currently USAID supports political parties through the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Party support includes the training of mid-level party leaders on registering members, developing a long-term political party strategy that includes a party platform based on issues, campaign messaging, platform and leadership development, media, and help with the party registration process. The International Republican Institute (IRI) does not provide party-specific support; rather, it supports organizations that form the basic building blocks of parties: civic society groups organized by issues like youth and women's groups.

¶5. (U) Most USG assistance in this area has been provided around elections, in order to help parties and politicians register with the state to run for office; currently USD 10 million has been allocated for the 2009/2010 elections, primarily for political party and candidate development. Other assistance includes support for female candidate training, the establishment of eight election training and information centers which were used by political parties and independent candidates as a resource center and for public events and training. Since April 2006, USAID's work has focused on the institutional development of the National Assembly and Provincial Councils. Some assistance continues to National Assembly political blocs.

----- Strategies to Help Parties Develop -----

¶6. (U) The Embassy intends to take the following steps, both through our assistance programs and through diplomatic means, to continue our support of political party development in Afghanistan:

POLITICAL SUPPORT:

-- We will work to increase interaction at all levels of the Embassy with political parties, in order to increase their visibility. We will focus in particular on the democratic parties since they are not led by former military commanders, but will also support the reformers within the more traditional parties as they push for greater democratization from within. We will also work with parties that have clear issue-based platforms, and are strong enough to meet the

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10,000 party member requirement. Some examples of such parties include the Republican Party, the Democratic Front and the National Democratic Participatory Front. Democratic Front leader and Office of Administrative Affairs (OAA) advisor Zulfigar Omid told us January 27 that the most important thing the international community could do for these parties is to have the Ambassador visit them, and nudge

the Presidential Palace to include them in his inner circle, which is "too often dominated by warlords."

-- The Embassy will continue to exert pressure on Karzai to form a party. His brother Mahmood, according to IRI, appeared at the door of the IRI offices in December asking for assistance to form a pro-Karzai political party. Although there is no evidence that this plea was sincere, since no follow-up conversations have taken place. This is the most difficult challenge for the Afghan body politic and international community, since Karzai has demonstrated a strong reluctance to form a party.

-- The Embassy will coordinate with international partners on issues related to political parties, and discuss how to advance their development through both political and assistance means. The Embassy has already engaged with the British Embassy on this issue, and will host a larger discussion group in the short-term.

-- The Embassy will continue to support improved candidate vetting for the 2010 Parliamentary elections and beyond, together with Afghan civil society and international partners.

-- The USG, together with international community, should continue to push for electoral and constitutional reform that replaces the SNTV system with a proportional representation (PR or a mixed PR system) that includes party lists, in order to encourage party formation. Afghans will demand some system that allows independents to still be elected, so the mixed system is the most realistic.

-- The Political Section will encourage MPs to debate Parliamentary reorganization as a means to foster party development. This reorganization would not require new laws; instead the Lower House speaker could, as the elected leader of the house, have the right to name committee chairs. Currently, individual committees elect their chairs. As a result, many warlords hold leadership positions because MPs are bullied into voting for them. Requiring the Speaker to build a coalition that trades support for his speakership in exchange for committee chairs could encourage significant ideological overlap, and better gender representation if the women MPs play their cards right. This might encourage MPs to work within coalitions and voting blocs. USAID, through the Afghan Parliamentary Assistance Program (APAP), will further study and present the issue to Parliamentary leadership.

ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS:

-- The Embassy will continue programs that support political parties directed at upcoming elections, but at the same time, will ensure that political party support continues post-elections so that parties do not disappear as soon as the elections end, but rather they grow and develop over time.

-- The Embassy will host press and round table events with up-and-coming young politicians, and will encourage NDI and IRI to work more with the younger generation with their current programs. About 85 percent of the Afghan population is under the age of 25; these Afghans do not have the same living memory of the negative use of political parties in Afghanistan's history, and are the greatest hope for a changing mentality and use of political parties in Afghanistan's growing democracy.

-- We will nominate up-and-coming young political party leaders, to include the sons and daughters of prominent politicians, for the International Visitors program, in order to influence the leaders of the next generation. Several young democratic party leaders have already been selected for this program.

-- The Embassy will work to increase the number of training courses to mid-level party staff, and pay for party coordination meetings and gatherings to allow these parties

to develop strategies and connect with the party base. Assistance will be provided to all of the main parties, but extra attention will be given to the nascent democratic parties. USAID will work together with its implementers and the Political Section in identifying parties that meet these

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criteria.

-- The Embassy will increase civics training throughout Afghanistan, to not only inform Afghan citizens about the importance of parties, but also the basics of democracy. In an attempt to address the historical stigma issue, the Embassy will support public messaging that explains the importance of political movements or parties when they are directed at making social change, and are focused on specific issues (i.e. anti-corruption, the building of the agricultural sector, jobs, etc.)

--The Political Section, through Afghan Women's Empowerment grants, will support programs that encourage women's participation in Afghanistan's political sphere.

-- USAID and the Political Section will partner to host a series of round table discussions with Afghan university students and professors, in an effort to better determine what kind of programs would best assist Afghans in learning about and developing issue-based political parties in Afghanistan. We will consider providing assistance that will expand students' practical understanding of political processes, including the role of parties in the legislative process. We will also work to find an Afghan NGO to provide training and technical support for youth-based organizations.

Comment

17. (C) Afghanistan is one of the most difficult environments for the development of political parties due to three decades of war, historical stigmas, cultural aversion, and current electoral practices. However, in order for Afghanistan to develop as a democracy, citizens must begin to rally around issues rather than only around ethnic or regional affiliation, and try to influence the government through an improved electoral process. The USG, together with international partners, must re-focus our attention on this issue, allowing time for parties to develop over the long-term. Perhaps the most important three action items -- encourage Karzai to form a party, increase the vetting process of MPs, and support for a change in the electoral system -- are the most difficult since currently there is limited political will in the presidential palace for these changes. This policy is our best hope for a move away from a warlord-dominated political scene, and a move toward generational transfer. End Comment.
Eikenberry